

Terminally Beached

I stood in the centre of this vast, empty space and admired its geometric purity. A million tiny lines ran from the point where I stood, horizontally and vertically, spreading out like some enormous alien grid. A sadistic game of battleships took place, with myself as both source and target of the deadly missile.

Overhead several jet fighters flew in formation. For days now they had patrolled the sky, the apex of their retreat into the stratosphere the cue for yet another bout of radio transmission: Situational normal. All fucked up.

I returned to the grid. In the small lines of grout I saw whole universes rise and fall; in the tiny tiles I saw images of great antiquity, dramas played out in a small scale on a trillion billion different screens; in the traverse between blues that signified the tide-mark I saw endless sunsets; in the ashes that lined the floor and stained the canvasses I saw only pointless death.

Jane had always considered this swimming pool a folly; an extravagant waste. After all, the public baths were only up the road, and making space had cost us an herb garden and two rather spectacular rhododendron bushes. Still, I insisted upon my pleasure, and thus we found ourselves with this admittedly ostentatious hole in the ground, filled mainly with rainwater and used mostly by insect life.

Despite her initial antipathy towards its construction, Jane found far better use out of the thing than I ever did. How many days did I spend in my study on the third floor looking down, watching her bathe and exercise herself? On hot summer days I would gaze like some envious suitor or cuckolded husband whilst she baked her wares in the sunshine; in the latter seasons, after one of our customary arguments I would stare down with malice as she shed her clothes in the icy suburban wind and braved the chill in some kind of self-lacerating pantomime that would always end up leaving me feeling coldest.

Now it lay bare, the water and chlorine long evaporated along with almost every other trace of soft, organic matter for ten miles around. The sun baked the tiles, leaving the soles of my feet a bed of blisters, but still I remained. I had stood here for eleven days now and I had no plans on moving.

Perhaps because of her love for it, Jane never cared one jot for the maintenance of the pool. Content as she was to lie in it and rub her naked form across its edges she never once considered the level of upkeep I had to put into it. Although I rarely used the pool I was extremely fastidious when it came to cleanliness; many evenings were spent sifting detritus from the surface; insects killed by their own thirst; wrappers borne by the wind and seeds cast aside by unwilling parents. Each of these I would carefully lift and then place near the filters at the sides of the pool, spending minutes captivated as these watchmen of the waters processed their alien goods for disposal. Jane used this time to go into town and do things she needed to do; shop, chat, and meet friends. When she returned I would hasten to my study.

They had advised me not to return. They had forbidden me. Hathaway, that tedious and dry academic, had been sent in my stead, and I knew he was still out there somewhere. No doubt cataloguing everything he saw in that utterly professional manner he tended to affect when he wasn't attacking bottles of

scotch with his sawn-off teeth. Yet here I was, and I knew that squadron of planes was as much for myself as for him. They knew what I was like.

That was my problem, or so Jane had said. My work took precedence. Yet I never quite knew what that work was. None of us did. Oh we knew the practicalities of it; we knew what the results would probably be; but none of us were prepared for the consequences. That was why I had to come out here.

Five years, nearly, since last I set foot in this swimming pool. Then, it had been full of water and the sun had been in the sky. Birds would swim through the air and cheer flowed through our veins. Kisses were currency and easy familiarity graced our sense of touch. As I knelt and touched the floor I wondered about how quickly and easily that had all fallen apart.

For a start, contracts like that didn't come around very often, particularly in this day and age. Weaponry that had that effect was only a pipe-dream at the time and nation-state after nation-state was desperate to get hold of the technology. As part of the team that had conducted the initial tests I obviously found myself at the centre of a covert bidding war that in many ways could have seen me install myself as the head of a small but feisty nation. Instead, along with the rest of the research team, we sold ourselves to highest bidder.

Political chaos then ensued; the world practically erupted when we announced our decision. Why did we do what we did? Who knows? Despite being there I certainly can't give a reason; was it money? Professional obligation? Or was it curiosity? Were we simply that obsessed with finding out if we were right, and screw the consequences?

Regardless, it cost me Jane. It cost me the house. Ultimately, it has probably cost me my job.

Except it worked. It worked like a beauty. I myself had chosen the test subject and like a proud father I couldn't be happier with the results.

I stared down at her charred skeleton, the bones left arranged in the odd angles where they had fallen as every droplet of moisture had been sucked out of the surrounding area. I had seen a thousand such bodies so far on my trek, but this one was the oddest. Most had been caught in some mundane action; I had witnessed enough skeletons and partly burned corpses sat in front of televisions to last me a lifetime and the entrance to the nearby supermarket was literally a morass of partially liquefied limbs. But as I stood there staring at the obtuse but still calm angles of Jane's desiccated corpse I felt a certain sense of achievement.

I pulled my mobile phone from my pocket, scanning the sky for aircraft; someone answered:

"Well. It works..."

(In memory of J.G. Ballard)

Alexander Hayden James Smith, 20/04/2009